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From Central Asian Strategy into EurAsian Strategy

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Having recently spent some time in all five states of Central Asia on a project monitoring the EU's strategy there, I am persuaded that the regional dimension to this strategy needs reconsideration. The EU wishes to foster enlightened regional cooperation among the five states and allocates 30% of its budget to regional projects. The EU comes to the region with a presumption that regional cooperation leading possibly even to regional integration is a good idea. But has the regional dimension to the EU's Central Asia Strategy been well conceived for the 21st century when the map of Eurasia is being radically redrawn, following the experiences of the 20th century when the region was integrated into the Soviet Union, sealed off from the rest of the world?

The region has a modest population size of only 67 million people, so regional economic integration between these states does not have much potential if it is not part of a wider economic openness. There are some activities that have intrinsically a cross-border regional cooperative dimension, such as border management itself, transport corridors and above all water management. However all three of these have vital cross-border dimensions linking to neighbours external to the region, or have trans-continental dimensions. For example, border management concerns above all the trafficking of drugs where Central Asia is just a transit passage between Afghanistan and Europe, Russia and China. Transport corridors are essentially a trans-continental affair, with links from West China to West Europe being developed as well as North-South links down to South Asia. The water issue also, until now viewed as the quintessential Central Asia question with the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers flowing down to the Aral Sea, offers a possible South Asian hydro-electricity link option that might unlock the way for intra-Central Asian cooperation (South Asia has demand for summer electricity, which is when downstream Central Asia wants the water for agriculture).

Look at the current political priorities of the states of the region. Kazakhstan justifiably views its economic modernisation ambitions as being in a different league compared to its regional neighbours, and looks West with its "Path to Europe" programme as a strategic move to avoid exclusive dependence on Russia and China. Turkmenistan, while remaining a completely closed and repressive political system, nonetheless frames its development priority in the opening of gas pipeline connections towards all points of the compass, North to Russia, East to China,

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South to Iran, and potentially West across the Caspian Sea to Europe, if the EU were to make a credible and major offer. Kyrgyzstan's economy, which is desperately poor, is now substantially dependent on a transit trade function for Chinese goods to flow through to Kazakhstan and Russia. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are concerned to 'disenclave' themselves to the South with transport corridors through Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to the Gulf and Indian Ocean, and they are now inescapably affected by the Afghanistan drama, with their ethnic brothers forming the most important minorities there.

All these wider regional or trans-continental issues that involve Central Asia are also of concern to the EU, but in a much wider context than just Central Asia. In fact there is a cluster of essentially EurAsian issues here, more than Central Asian issues, with important long-term implications for the EU's relations with Russia, China and India, as well the short-term priority of finding some kind of political resolution of the Afghanistan imbroglio. Central Asia features necessarily in these issues, but intra-Central Asian regional cooperation is rarely of the essence. More important would be a concept for Central Asia of an 'extroverted regionalism', which would 'disenclave' this landlocked territory and open up different external options for each state. So for both the EU and the states of the region, an 'extroverted regionalism' is more interesting than the 'introverted regionalism' that has constituted the main idea so far in the EU's Central Asia strategy.

Going even wider, the EU foreign policy strategy must now focus on the issues of the newly emerging multi-polar world, with China, India, Russia and the EU itself as newly emerging or re-emerging major powers on the Eurasian land mass. This is the No 1 strategic challenge of the 21st century, to find ways to secure some kind of normative cooperative order across a host of economic, political and security issues, based on some mix of multilateralism and cooperative arrangements between the major players. However we can still come back to Central Asia, which is unique as a landlocked region sitting precisely in the middle between the big four of EurAsia – Russia to its North, China to the East, India to the South and the EU to the West. Central Asia is going to be involved in many of these issues, and centrally in the geographical sense, but obviously not with regard to the main weight of the issues.

The conclusion that seems due is that the EU should make an addition to its conception of the multiple regional dimensions of its foreign policy, which already has the Eastern Partnership, Northern Dimension, the Union for the Mediterranean, Black Sea Synergy and now the Central Asia Strategy. Each of these initiatives has its own rationale, although some may fail to develop real momentum. But what is missing now is an overarching EurAsian dimension, looking for ways to devise major cooperative ventures for the multi-polar world, and in particular for the Eurasian landmass. This would be, inter alia, a constructive move towards Russia after the awkward period in which the launch of the Eastern Partnership has been seen as deepening the segmentation of the post-Soviet space in EU policies. But back to Central Asia: the introverted regionalism of the Central Asian strategy should be allocated a more modest role or even virtually dissolved, with the major issues finding their place in an extroverted regionalism that could be framed within a EurAsian strategy.